

Classic Paper

PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALISM¹

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ABSTRACT

The beginnings of American spiritualism coincided with the growth of scientific materialism in the middle of the nineteenth Century. Originally written in July 1948 as a foreword to *The Unobstructed Universe*, this paper summarizes information about unconscious and spiritualistic communication.

KEYWORDS: Psychology, spiritualism

The reader should not casually lay this book aside on discovering that it is about “Invisibles,” that is to say about spirits, on the assumption that it belongs to the literature of spiritualism. One can very well read the book without resorting to any such hypothesis or theory, and take it simply as a report of psychological facts or a continuous series of communications from the unconscious—which is, indeed, what it is really about. Even spirits appear to be psychic phenomena whose origins lie in the unconscious. At all events, the “Invisibles” who are the source of information in this book are shadowy personifications of unconscious contents, conforming to the rule that activated portions of the unconscious assume the character of *personalities* when they are perceived by the conscious mind. For this reason, the voices heard by the insane seem to belong to definite personalities who can often be identified, and personal intentions are attributed to them. And in fact, if the observer is able—though this is not always easy—to collect together a fair number of these verbal hallucinations, he will discover in them something very like motives and intentions of a personal character.

The same is true to an even greater degree of the “controls” in mediumistic seances who make the “communications.” Everything in our psyche has to begin with a personal character, and one must push one’s investigations very far before one comes across elements that are no longer personal. The “I” or “we” of these communications has a merely grammatical significance and is never proof of the existence of a spirit, but only of the physical presence of the medium or mediums. In dealing with “proof of identity,” such as are offered in this book, one must remember that proofs of this kind would seem to be theoretically impossible considering the enormous number of possible sources of error. We know for a certainty that the unconscious is capable of subliminal perceptions and is a treasure house of lost memories. In addition, it has been proved by experiment that time and space are *relative* for the unconscious, so that unconscious perception, not being impeded by the space-time barrier, can obtain experiences to which the conscious mind has no access. In this connection I would refer to the experiments conducted at Duke University and other places.²

Considering all this, the proof of identity seems to be a forlorn hope, in theory anyway. In practice, however, things are rather different because cases actually occur which are so overwhelmingly impressive they are absolutely convincing

to those concerned. Even though our critical arguments may cast doubt on every single case, there is nor a single argument that could prove that spirits do not exist. In this regard, therefore, we must rest content with a “non liquet.” Those who are convinced of the reality of spirits should know that this is a subjective opinion which can be attracted on any number of grounds. Those who are not convinced should beware of naively assuming that the whole question of spirits has been settled and that all manifestations of this kind are meaningless swindles. This is not so at all. These phenomena exist in their own right, regardless of the way they are interpreted, and it is beyond all doubt that they are genuine manifestations of the unconscious. The communications of “spirits” are statements about the unconscious psyche, provided that they are really spontaneous and are not cooked up by the conscious mind. They have this in common with dreams; for dreams, too, are *statements about the unconscious*, which is why the psychotherapist uses them as a first class source of information.

The *Unobstructed Universe* may therefore be regarded as offering valuable information about the unconscious and its ways. It differs very favorably from the usual run of spiritualistic communications in that it eschews all edifying verbiage and concentrates instead on certain general ideas. This pleasing difference may be attributable to the happy circumstances that the real begetter of the book is the medium Betty, the deceased wife of the author. It is her “spirit” that pervades the book. We are familiar with her personality from Mr. White's earlier books,³ and we know how great the educative influence she had on all those around her, constellating in their unconscious all the things that come to light in these communications.

The educative intention behind Betty's activity does not differ essentially from the general tenor of spiritualistic literature. The “spirits” strive to develop man's consciousness and to unite it with the unconscious, and Betty, on her own admission, pursues the same aim. It is interesting to note that the beginnings of American spiritualism coincided with the growth of scientific materialism in the middle of the nineteenth century. Spiritualism in all its forms therefore has a *compensatory* significance. Nor should it be forgotten that a number of highly competent scientists, doctors, and philosophers have vouched for the truth of certain phenomena which demonstrate the very peculiar effect the psyche has upon matter. Among them were Friedrich Zollner, William Crookes,

Alfred Richet, Camille Flammarion, Giovanni Schiaparelli, Sir Oliver Lodge, and our Zurich psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler, not to mention a large number of less well-known names. Although I have not distinguished myself by any original researches in this field, I do not hesitate to declare that I have observed a sufficient number of such phenomena to be completely convinced of their reality. To me they are inexplicable, and I am therefore unable to decide in favour of any of the usual interpretations.

Although I do not wish to prejudice the reader of this book, I cannot refrain from drawing attention to some of the issues it raises. What, above all, seems to me worth mentioning—especially in view of the fact that the author has no knowledge of modern physiology—it is that the “Invisibles” favour an energetic conception of the psyche which has much in common with the recent psychological findings. The analogy is to be found in the idea of “frequency.” But here we come upon a difference that should not be overlooked. For whereas the psychologist supposes that consciousness has a higher energy than the unconscious (i.e., to a personified unconscious content) a higher “frequency” than to the living psyche. One should not, however, attach too much importance to the fact that the concept of energy is made use of in both cases, since this is a fundamental category of thought in all the modern sciences.

The “Invisible” further assert that our world of consciousness and the “Beyond” together form a single cosmos, with the result that the dead are not in a different place from the living. There is only a difference in their “frequencies,” which might be linked to the revolutions of a propeller: at low speeds the blades are visible, but at high speeds they disappear. In psychological terms this would mean that the conscious and the unconscious psyche are one, but are separated by different amount of energy. Science can agree with this statement, although it cannot accept the claim that the unconscious possesses a higher energy since this is not borne out by experience.

According to the “Invisibles,” the “Beyond” is this same cosmos but without the limitations imposed on mortal man by space and time. Hence it is called “the unobstructed universe.” Our world is contained in this higher order and owes its existence principally to the fact that the corporeal man has a low “frequency,” thanks to which the limiting factors of space and time become

operative. The world without limitations is called "Orthos," which means the "right" or "true" world. This tells us clearly enough what kind of significance is imputed to the "Beyond," though it must be emphasized that this does not imply a devaluation of our world. I am reminded of the philosophical riddle which my Arab dragonman asked me when visiting the tombs of the Khalifs in Cairo. "Which man is the cleverer: the one who builds his house where he will be for the longest time, or the one who builds it where he will be only temporarily?" Betty is in no doubt that this limited life should be lived as fully as possible, because the attainment of maximum consciousness while still in this world is an essential condition for the coming life in "Orthos." She is thus in agreement not only with the general trend of spiritualistic philosophy, but also with Plato, who regarded philosophy as a preparation for death.

Modern psychology can affirm that for many people this problem arises in the second half of life, when the unconscious often makes itself felt in a very insistent way. The unconscious is the land of dreams, and according to the primitive view the land of dreams is also the land of the dead and of the ancestors. From all we know about it, the unconscious does in fact seem to be relatively independent of space and time, nor is there anything objectionable in the idea that consciousness is surrounded by the sea of unconscious, just as this world is contained in "Orthos." The unconscious is of unknown extent and is probably of greater importance than consciousness. At any rate, the role which consciousness plays in the life of primitives and primates is insignificant compared with that of the unconscious. The events in our modern world, as we see humanity blindly staggering from one catastrophe to the next, are not calculated to strengthen anyone's belief in the value of consciousness and the freedom of the will. Consciousness *should* of course be of supreme importance, for it is the only guarantee of freedom and alone makes it possible for us to avoid disaster. But this, it seems, must remain for the present a pious hope.

Betty's aim is to extend consciousness as far as possible by uniting it with "Orthos." To this end it must be trained to listen to the unconscious psyche in order to bring about the collaboration of the "Invisibles." The aims of modern psychotherapy are similar: it too endeavors to compensate the one-sidedness and narrowness of the conscious mind by deepening its knowledge of the unconscious.

The similarity of aim should not, however, lead us to overlook a profound difference of viewpoint. The psychology of the “Betty Books” differs in no essential respect from the primitive view of the world, where the contents of the unconscious are all projected into external objects. What appears to the primitive to be a “spirit” may on a more conscious level be an abstract thought, just as the gods of antiquity turned into philosophical ideas at the beginning of our era. This primitive projection content is visibly “there” in the object and calls for no further reflection. But since the projection does bring the unconscious a bit nearer to consciousness, it is at least better than nothing. Mr. White’s book certainly makes us think, but the kind of thinking it caters to is not psychological; it is mechanistic, and this of little help when we are faced with the task of integrating projections. Mechanistic thinking is one of the many Americanisms that stamp the book as a typical product and leave one in no doubt as to its origin. But it is well worth while getting to know this side of American psyche, for the world will hear a great deal more of it in times to come.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. C. G. Jung [F. C. Hull, Translator], Psychology and Spiritualism, In *Psychology and the Occult* (Herbert Read, Michael Fordham & Gerhard Adler, Editors; William McGuire, Executive Editor, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1977), pp. 138-142. *Reprinted with permission.*
[This text was first published as the foreword to Stewart Edward White, *Uneingeschränktes Weltall* (Jurich, 1948), the German trans. of *The Unobstructed Universe* (New York, 1940), in which a foreword by Jung had not appeared. It was subsequently published as “Psychologie und Spiritismus,” *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, n.s., XVI:7 (November, 1948), pp. 430-435. White (1873-1946), American author, chiefly wrote adventure stories with a frontier background; he became involved with spiritualism later in life. Jung was introduced to his books in 1946 by Fritz Künkel, American psychotherapist; see his letter to Künkel, 10 July 1946, discussing *The Unobstructed Universe* at length, in C. G. Jung: Letters, Ed. G. Adler, Vol. I].
2. J. B. Rhine, *New Frontiers of the Mind* (1947); *The Reach of the Mind* (1948). Also G.N.M. Tyrrrell, *The Personality of Man* (1947).
3. *The Betty Book* (1937); *Across the Unknown* (1939); *The Road I Know* (1942).

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